Interview with Willard B. Devlin

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

WILLARD B. DEVLIN

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

Initial interview date: October 15, 1986

Q: Bill Devlin and I are old friends, so you'll find us referring to each other as Bill and Stu. We are discussing the subject of movements of peoples, basically the consular officer's perspective both from various posts abroad and from the Department of State on the visa policy and how it was administered.

Bill, could you give us just a little background before we get to your actual consular post? What brought you into the Foreign Service and in consular work in particular?

DEVLIN: Well, academically, after the war, I went to Tufts, majored in history and international relations, went to the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, where I got my master's and completed my doctoral residence in international relations. Then I had a Fulbright scholarship in Cairo. So overall, I was oriented to the Foreign Service, really, ever since I got out of the Army in '46.

In terms of getting into consular work, my first consular assignment was in Baghdad. I had seen and had to take over some consular work while I was in Aden, because the young consular officers there obviously didn't know how to cope with unusual situations. So they fell into my hands.

After Aden, I requested a consular assignment, and accordingly, I was assigned to Baghdad as chief of the consular section.

Q: With regard to the subject at hand, what were the main pressures for visas, both immigrant and non-immigrant, in Baghdad? You were in Baghdad when, to begin with?

DEVLIN: '63 to '66. The main pressures for visas were primarily in the immigrant visa category, and the applicants for the visas were primarily members of the Iraqi Christian community, who wanted to get out.

Q: This was after the revolution then?

DEVLIN: King Faisal was overthrown in '58, and then in '63, shortly after I got there, Kassim, who had overthrown Nuri al Said and the monarchy, was overthrown. Then there were three or four abortive coups and lots of street fighting. The position of the minorities was one of increasing fear, so they were seeking to get out to the United States. Iraq had, of course, after the First World War, been created out of their mandated area by the British in 1921. It was independent, but with heavy British influence. But what the British did immediately after the war, in order to establish a government, was to take and train as clerks the Christians and the Christian Arabs. This gave the Christians a position within the government and a vested interest in the security of the government, a status envied by the Muslim Arabs.

With the growing nationalism in Iraq, some anger or resentment was necessarily or inevitably directed against these Christians because the Muslims tended to identify the Christian minorities with the Western conquering powers. So this was the primary reason for the desire of the Christians to get out. Many of the Christians were Arabs but probably most were refugees out of Turkey, Iran, and the Soviet Union, from the period of the end of the First World War. These refugees or migrants were not Arab and did not identify themselves with Arab nationalism though most considered themselves to be Iraqis.

Q: Did they have eligibility for immigrant visas to the United States, most of these people?

DEVLIN: They didn't have eligibility in terms of any of the professional categories. Some would go as non-immigrants and find a way to stay and some would wait out the list and go as immigrants under a family preference. In Detroit there was a Christian Iraqi community, and these people were doing their very best, which was quite good, to provide the necessary immigration documentation, writing affidavits and so on, to assist their religious brethren in getting to the United States.

Q: There was no refugee program per se?

DEVLIN: It was not a refugee program. These people were not refugees in any routine sense of the word, because this was 1960. They had fled from Turkey, Iran, and the Soviet Union in 1918, 1920-. So they had come to Iraq and had settled.

Q: Were there any Iraqi Jews left by this time?

DEVLIN: There were a few Iraqi Jews left, not very many, but there were some. They also were part of the movement to leave. The Iraqi Jews had historically deeper ties in Iraq than did the immigrant Christians. That is, there had been a Jewish community in Iraq, primarily in Baghdad, for centuries.

Q: Did you have a long waiting list or were there any particular problems dealing with both the Christians and Jews in Iraq?

DEVLIN: There was a long waiting list, yes, several years. I've forgotten now.

Q: This was because of our laws, not Iraqi law?

DEVLIN: That's right.

Q: Did the Iraqis give you any difficulty as far as letting these people go?

DEVLIN: No, no. The people were able to obtain passports. They probably had to do a certain amount of bribery and so on to get their documents, but basically they were able to get their passports. The Muslim rulers of the country really didn't mind at all if these people left.

Q: Were there any pressures put on you from the United States to issue visas to people who probably weren't qualified because of relationships or something?

DEVLIN: Not really. There were always cases when some attorneys would be pushing some cases. The people who were issuing these affidavits of support in Detroit, in the section of Detroit known to Iraqis as Telkaif, which was named after a town in Northern Iraq, where most of these Christian Arabs resided, continually pressed for acceptance of their often spurious documentation.

Q: By the way, was there any particular fraud as far as you were concerned?

DEVLIN: Primarily with these affidavits, it was a matter of keeping control on them, because if you didn't keep control and some sorts of records on them, you would find that one man, who had no relationship to any of the applicants, was busy issuing affidavits of support. As an example, he would have quite ample financial resources, but he may very well have granted about a dozen or two affidavits of support, though his personal connections to the applicants were nil. So the individual affidavits were highly suspect. What we had to do was reject these and go after possibly less financially impressive affidavits, from people who had a family relationship, who, in fact, we believed would provide the necessary financial assistance if needed.

Q: You left Baghdad about when?

DEVLIN: It was in '66.

Q: Then you were with the junior officer program. Then you took over the consular training at the Foreign Service Institute. Did you follow Alice Curran?

DEVLIN: Yes.

Q: Could you mention a bit about how consular training for some years had been done by Alice Curran and what you thought were some of the effects of this?

DEVLIN: Well, the consular training course was undoubtedly the most concentrated, difficult and intensive course at FSI. Alice Curran's particular manner of conducting the course was forceful, abrasive, and very, very demanding of the students. She was not able, even if she had wanted to—and I don't think she wanted to—to make any significant changes in the format of the course. Because to do so would be treading on hundreds of toes in the passport office, the visa office, and in special consular services. The individuals who would lecture felt—and they received the support on this from their superiors—that no consular officer could conceivably go out without having had their five hours of lecture, and that the only way that a consular officer could be trained was to virtually memorize the regulations.

The Foreign Service Institute had its mind elsewhere than on the consular officer. I don't know what sort of a course Alice inherited, though I don't think she changed it much, if any, other than in terms of making it more intensive, and abrasive through her own personal approach to it. When I had it after that, I had no opportunity to make substantive changes. I tried, but there was no way that I could persuade either the Institute or any of the three elements of the consular service to modify, change, reduce, expand, or in any way break away from this “magnificent” system of lectures.

Q: The reason I am asking in some detail about this consular course is that it was renowned in the Foreign Service for turning young men and women who came into the Foreign Service off consular work, because they felt they were treated as adolescents,

doors were locked if they weren't on time, and it had its effect in deterring many young officers who otherwise might have decided to stay in consular work from continuing, because they felt they were made to feel the work was somewhat demeaning and not worthy of their talents. Did you have this impression?

DEVLIN: Yes, all of that is true. This, to a very large degree, dealt not just with the content and the narrow presentation and intensive manner of the course, but as you said, with the administration of the course by Alice. She might have been a good third grade teacher in a reformatory. But she did all of these things. She irritated the students, she treated the students as, at best, immature high school students, and she got their backs up very quickly. She managed, throughout the course, to keep their backs up.

Q: When you took this over, were you able to make any at least attitudinal changes?

DEVLIN: Oh, yes, I think so. Just the manner that I would deal with the course was quite a bit different than the manner that she did. I, at the same time, while I was conducting this course, off and on I would act as chairman or assistant chairman of the junior officer courses, so I knew junior officers before they came into the course. This made it easier in terms of being able to relate to them better. I made minor changes in the conduct of course which made it somewhat more palatable. But the substantive changes in the course I was able to make were minimal.

Q: What about the attitude that you found of those who came to the consular course? Were many interested in serving as consular officers professionally, or were more of them just an introductory period? How did you find this?

DEVLIN: John Stutesman, who was the dean of the School for Professional Studies, of which the consular course was a part, and I had lots of discussion about this. In at least one of the courses, while still in the junior officer course, but after they had received a certain amount of familiarization in each of the major functions of the Service, we polled them to find out who wanted to be a political or economic or admin consular officer. I've

forgotten the exact figures, but I don't think I'm wrong in recalling that at least one-third, if not more, at that stage opted for a consular career, because they felt it would be more interesting.

This poll was done fairly early in the junior officer course, not so early that it would be meaningless, but still not at the end of the course. We conducted another poll, either the same course or another one, but anyway, this was at the end of the junior officer class. At that time, the number of persons who wanted to be consular offices and make their career in the consular field, had reduced dramatically. Again, I don't know the figures, but it was a very dramatic reduction.

It is my contention that this was not entirely the result of stories that people had heard circulating about Alice Curran's treatment of the consular course students. It was also a pervasive implication in a very large number of the talks and lectures that were presented to the officers in the junior officer class; things which a speaker could very well have said —and I can't quote because of the years and so on, but this is not atypical—a Foreign Service Officer lecturing before the class could make an aside comment, “Well, you may be assigned as a consular officer. Well, you could probably survive that for maybe three or four months, but for God's sake, get out and get into political or economic as soon as you can.” Instances as blatant as that occurred at different times by different speakers throughout the junior officer course. So that by the time the officers had completed their course, before they had taken the consular course or anything else, they knew, because they were all very sharp young men and women, they knew perfectly well that the “in” group was not the consular group.

Q: How true. When you left the consular training, you then were to see some of the people you trained put it into practice, because you were sent to Lima. That was 1970, and you spent four years there. You were chief of the consular section. Who was the ambassador when you were there?

DEVLIN: Toby Belcher.

Q: How large was the consular section that you were in?

DEVLIN: I'd say there was myself, there was a citizenship officer, two immigrant visa officers, a non-immigrant visa officer, at least one vocational junior officer. So there were about seven or eight officers.

Q: How did the consular section fit into the embassy? Were you sort of a member of the team, or were you off to one side, in actual fact?

DEVLIN: I was, I think, very much in as a member of the team. Physically, we were off to the side, literally off to the side, because the embassy building had an L-shape and we were off on the L side, which worked out very nicely because of all the physical arrangements and so on. That gave us our own separate external entrance, and there were no complaints whatsoever because of our physical location or our physical quarters.

When I first arrived there, I had an overlap with my predecessor of maybe about a month. My predecessor never attended the country team meetings. Shortly after he departed, I was invited to attend these meetings.

Q: What would a country team meeting be?

DEVLIN: This meeting consisted of the ambassador, the DCM, and each chief of section, the military attach#s, and the head of the agency, and head of AID, head of USIS.

Q: What sort of things would be discussed?

DEVLIN: Obviously, mostly the current problems. Its primary purpose or initial purpose was for each of the individual elements of the embassy to be able to brief the ambassador as to what was going on in his or her own area of responsibility, and for the ambassador to seek the overall advice of the senior staff on whatever problems were coming up, as,

for example, if there was a reporting requirement which was coming up, but which would cross sectional lines, then individual responsibilities would be discussed in those meetings.

Q: Turning to the visa function, what were the types of people who came for visas in Peru?

DEVLIN: Maybe about three months, after I got there, Peru imposed exchange control. Up to that time, Peruvians had been able to deal in dollars or any other foreign currency with no restriction. They would have foreign bank accounts and so on. This was, as of one day, canceled.

Up to that time, the non-immigrant visa load in the embassy in Lima was moderate. There would be maybe 50 to 75 to 100 applicants. From that time forward, the number of daily non-immigrant applicants rose to at least 300 a day. This encompassed people of every social strata, many of them initially to go out and sort out their financial affairs, many of them to get out because they felt that this currency legislation was but a first step in other economic steps that would completely ruin them, so they wanted out.

The currency measures were taken obviously because the economy was having problems, and when an economy has a problem, unemployment is one of the obvious manifestations. So you had the middle and the upper class applying for non-immigrant visas, essentially as part of an escape of capital, and you had an increasing number of lower class that included the lowest economic class in the population, applying for non-immigrant visas purely to escape. The usual movement to get into a better economic situation.

Q: You had, in some cases, almost a tenfold increase in visa applicants. Were you given any extra assistance, or did you have to deal with it as you could?

DEVLIN: We coped.

Q: Were there any pressures either from the ambassador or the Department of State or Congress on you to be lenient, to be tougher on this? Or did you have any instructions?

DEVLIN: In those terms, no, we had no instructions. As far as the Department was concerned, our problem related entirely to a matter of volume. The Department's major control or guidance, if you will, at that time related not to whether a visa should or should not be issued. The Department, particularly the visa side, was faced with a tremendous increase of visa applications on a worldwide basis, therefore they were trying to get each individual visa issuing office on a more efficient basis. So they started at this time to introduce the statistical annual reports, to enable each visa officer, each section to come up with a man-hour figure for each immigrant and non-immigrant visa issued.

Q: Then you had the statistical base, but this would just create extra work for you, wouldn't it, without any return as far as more assistance?

DEVLIN: There were no more bodies available, but it did force one to look throughout the shop to find the most expeditious means to handle the workload.

Q: How would you describe the officers dealing with the visas that you had, both immigrant and non-immigrant? Were they well trained? Were they prejudiced? Were they completely swamped or in command of the situation?

DEVLIN: All of the above and none of the above; depends entirely on the individual. I had one officer there who was congenitally, apparently, incapable of reaching any decision on any visa. Therefore, each time an applicant came and the application wasn't completely satisfactory to the officer, the officer would ask for my opinion—and more paper and more paper and more paper, instead of reaching a decision. Others were more able to cope with the decision making process.

At the same time that we had this great increase in the visa workload we were also running into major protection problems because we had a steady increase in the number

of Americans being arrested, primarily for drugs, and we had an airline crash that killed 49 American high school students. So at this time that I divided the authority within the consular section to create a visa operating section, put that under the charge of the next ranking officer, and just told him to make whatever changes he could, in addition to whatever changes I could make in the procedures, to get the process done as quickly and as efficiently as possible. But the statistics were, for myself and probably just about for all the other section chiefs, a requirement to examine ones shop and find out why they were taking X number of hours to produce an immigrant visa, while such and such other place was taking X minus hours. There was something very competitive in basing this whole system on these numbers.

Q: This is the first time it has ever been done?

DEVLIN: To the best of my knowledge.

Q: What about within Peruvian social circles that the embassy was dealing with? Was there a lot of pressure on you as the head of the consular section and your officers to issue visas, from social acquaintances and also government officials? Was this a difficult time?

DEVLIN: Yes. This bore a direct relationship to the number of people who were applying for non-immigrant visas. As that rose, so also did the pressures rise. The workload was such that on the non-immigrant side, we would normally turn off the line, the non-immigrant visa line, at, say, 2:00 o'clock.

Q: These were people waiting to be initially serviced for visas.

DEVLIN: Right. We would turn that line off at, say, 2:00 or 2:30, whenever the non-immigrant visa officer judged to be an appropriate time on a day-to-day basis. There wasn't an automatic time. And the office closed, as I recall, at 5:00 o'clock. From the time

we turned it off, those people who were beyond the cut off point in line and others who joined the line would then go outside of the courtyard and wait in line for tomorrow.

Q: Where were the Peruvians going that went to the United States, either as immigrants or non-immigrants?

DEVLIN: It was hard to tell which was which.

Q: But the ones that were going really to settle permanently?

DEVLIN: Newark, New Jersey, seemed to be the home of virtually every Peruvian of the world.

Q: So you had lawyers writing to you. What about congressmen from New Jersey, Rodino, for example?

DEVLIN: Rodino came down to visit us.

Q: This is Peter Rodino, Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee. I don't know if he was at that time.

DEVLIN: He came down as part of a swing-through Latin America, and he looked at the visa situation and the whole consular situation. There was obviously nothing terribly new that he saw there that he hadn't seen before and was quite familiar with. I do not recall ever receiving a letter from Rodino, though we had a fair amount of congressional correspondence. Most of the congressional correspondence was of a routine nature, that is to say, if you gave the congressman or senator a decent answer, that satisfied him, as opposed to the congressman or senator insisting that his particular visa applicant be treated specially.

We also had attorneys. Again, with the increase in applicants and the waiting list, there was always attorneys. This was the time when the Latin American immigrant applicants

could not change status while in the United States. So that in approximately 80% of our immigrant applications, the paperwork was filed from the United States.

Q: They had gone as non-immigrants to the United States.

DEVLIN: Non-immigrants to the United States.

Q: Settled in.

DEVLIN: Settled in, and at some subsequent time, sometimes five, ten years, two years, whatever the time frame was, they initiated their immigrant application. All the paperwork up to the time of the interview was done by mail, and they obviously sought to ensure that when they came down, that they had everything and there would be no hitches, because if they came down and were refused a visa, as, of course, a fair number were, they were stuck.

Q: Couldn't get back to the United States.

DEVLIN: Couldn't get back to the United States.

Q: To their families or jobs or whatever they had.

DEVLIN: Yes.

Q: What about fraud, other than people coming in and saying they wanted to go visit when they didn't, when they planned to stay? But fraud as far as forged documents or this type of thing. Was there much of a problem there?

DEVLIN: The major element of fraud in that sense related to the evidence of support and job offers and that sort of thing. I cannot recall that we found any particular ring or conspiracy or function to do this, but there were, certainly throughout the period, instances

where we just out of hand rejected documentation which we believed to be fraudulent. But only very rarely would we try to invoke 19, 212 A 19, the fraud section of the law.

Q: That's 212 A 19 of the Immigration Act.

DEVLIN: Yes.

Q: You left Lima in 1974. Then you moved to Hong Kong as chief of the consular section there. Hong Kong has always had the reputation of being sort of a fraud capital of the visa world. Did you find it quite a change regarding the visa function?

DEVLIN: No, not really, because Hong Kong's reputation as the fraud capital of the world was, to a large degree, based upon the old immigration law, where the only way for a Chinese to get in was via fraud. But with the new law.

Q: This would be the 1967 amendments to the immigration law.

DEVLIN: That's right. So since most of the people in Hong Kong applying for visas were not born in Hong Kong, and therefore they were not subject to the 100 limitations per year from Hong Kong. Those who were born in China had 20,000 visa numbers available. Therefore, the need for fraud was not as strong as it had been before when whatever the quota was, if there was a quota for China, it reduced the chances of the individual applicant to virtually nothing.

But fraud is a habit and a custom in China, and we had absolutely marvelous, incredible files on the Chinese. We had files which would tell us about a certain village in a province, and it would tell us everything about that village. It would tell us where the well was, and the names of the principal families. And most of these villages really concentrated on one little family group there, another family group here, so that if a Chinese came in and said that he was from such and such a village, and he said that his name was Chung, we could check that file—and did check the file—and find that very, very rarely, if ever, did Chungs

live in this village. Then we could ask him more questions about the village and more than likely, he would be unable to answer those questions.

Q: You used interpreters?

DEVLIN: We used interpreters. This was a great, great disadvantage, because Chinese, particularly Cantonese Chinese, it is not a Western language, it is not a language that the average American with a normal ability in foreign languages can pick up off the cuff. It is not a language that if you listen to it, to an interpreter and so on, in this process day in and day out, that you gradually pick up words and so on; in Chinese, you don't. So that the dependence upon interpreters was total, and this is bad.

Q: Were there any problems with interpreters?

DEVLIN: Yes, yes, there were problems with the interpreters. Very shortly after I left, one of our interpreters was fired because he—some of the charges amongst all those against him were that in order to process the papers well, he was getting sexual favors from the women.

The same type of fraud applied not just with the visas, but the same type of fraud applied to passports.

Q: This would be Chinese who claimed American citizenship.

DEVLIN: Chinese who claimed American citizenship.

Q: Were you adequately staffed there on the visa side?

DEVLIN: The staff was very good and quite adequate. I forget how many we had, but we could very well have had 50 people.

Q: How about the officers? Would you say they were happy with their assignment there, not happy? How did they feel?

DEVLIN: Most of them focused their satisfaction or dissatisfaction on Hong Kong, as opposed to the work itself. People either loved Hong Kong or hated Hong Kong, and much of this depended upon, obviously, the individual and on the housing. The housing intrinsically was pretty good; 99% of the people lived in very nice apartments. But it was still a concrete jungle, and not everybody wants to live in an apartment. It restricts one in terms of getting out easily and so on, and the recreational facilities were not as good as lots of people would have liked. So some people found the opportunity to be in a place as culturally exciting as Hong Kong to be one of the greatest gifts in the world. Others found it to be oppressive, because they were cramped up in a little corner.

Q: Back to the flow of immigrants. What were the pressures? We're talking about the Chinese. What were the pressures on them to go to the United States?

DEVLIN: It was pressures primarily economic, and it was an incentive, primarily economic. The Chinese, as most of the applicants evidenced, had an excellent ability to work in a western society. But they could do far better in the United States than they could in Hong Kong. They could do far better in Hong Kong than in China. So that it was a matter of just moving up economically to a better life for themselves.

Q: In the period you were there, were people beginning to feel concerned, particularly the wealthy Chinese merchant class, about the mainland British claim on Hong Kong, which runs out in 1997?

DEVLIN: Yes, they were. Every year that that came closer, there was something of a decline in their willingness to reinvest in the economy, more apprehension of what would happen, a greater desire to ensure that their children would be able to get to the United States, get to England or Australia. The United States, Canada, and England were the

major objectives. It was difficult to get into Australia. Clearly, a Chinese tradition was to prepare the way for their families and looking at the date of 1997 coming up meant that the time to prepare is now.

Q: I assume a fairly large number of rather wealthy people using their wealth to gain legal admittance to the United States but then would return, keeping their alien residence status.

DEVLIN: Oh, yes. Yes, this happened quite often. Quite often. As a matter of fact, some of the local employees in the consulate were in a situation like that.

Q: You left Hong Kong in 1976. You happened to be, if I recall, in Washington, and they told you instead of returning to Hong Kong, you were sent to Santo Domingo as chief of the counselor section. It's not only a change, but from a work point of view, a change for the worse, wasn't it?

DEVLIN: Well, Santo Domingo doesn't compare to Hong Kong in any sense. Santo Domingo is the place where, if you win a prize, first prize is two weeks in Santo Domingo. The booby prize is a year in Santo Domingo.

Q: And you got two years in Santo Domingo.

DEVLIN: I got two years in Santo Domingo, a bit less than two years.

Q: Could you describe the counselor section in Santo Domingo?

DEVLIN: Well, the consulate general had its own separate building. We were about two or three block away from the embassy. We had a tremendous non-immigrant visa workload. The average number of applicants per day ranged from 400 to 700 or 800. We had to lead the applicants in through essentially a chute arrangement.

Q: Like a cattle chute?

DEVLIN: Like a cattle chute, under cover but outside of the building. They spoke to the non-immigrant visa officer through a bulletproof window. I think there were four windows. Before they got in the line, we had a Dominican policeman there who had a large box, and he insisted that each one in the line deposit their pistol or other weapon in the box before going through.

Q: And carrying weapons was . . .

DEVLIN: Carrying weapons was quite common, and every day that I went out to check on how the line was going, without exception, in looking in the box, there would be three to ten pistols in the box.

Q: What were the Dominicans after when they were coming to get a visa?

DEVLIN: Whatever kind of visa they were after, they were after immigration, essentially. The Dominican Republic economically cannot support its population. There was great unemployment there and under-employment. It is physically near the United States. It has a long tradition of ties to the United States culturally, economically; there are all sorts of ties to the United States. And by now, there are many, many personal and family relations in the United States.

Q: Where were they going for the most part?

DEVLIN: Initially, Florida. That was the major destination. Most, we knew, were thinking of staying, but also into New York, and pretty much diverse throughout the country.

Q: Being so close to the United States, and I understand that particularly from the Caribbean islands, many of those that come over both as non-immigrants or immigrants, but as you said, to work in the United States no matter what their stated goal was, many of them were working as domestic servants, is that correct?

DEVLIN: That's correct.

Q: I would imagine that you would have a great many irate American citizens calling, writing, complaining to their Congress because they were unable to get an illegal housemaid in. Was this the case?

DEVLIN: There was a lot of that, and it was close enough, too, so that in many instances, the American citizen came down. It was also close enough so that, once again, immigration attorneys came in to visit in order to push their cases.

Q: I almost hate to have this go on the record, but would you give me your impression of what you think of immigration attorneys?

DEVLIN: Well, it is not a very high opinion. I think the immigration attorneys that I've met—and there are quite a few by now—very, very few have impressed me as being terribly competent in their own field. Ethically, I don't give them very high marks, so overall, my impression and opinion of immigration attorneys is, at best, negative.

Q: I've heard consular officers describe immigration attorneys as "those who weren't fast enough to keep up with ambulances." What about Congress? Did you get much pressure from Congress?

DEVLIN: Yes. We got much more pressure from Congress in Santo Domingo than we did anywhere else. I think part of this was because of the proximity and because of the larger number of people who were coming in, and because of the larger Dominican community in the United States. So that I think there's a direct relationship with that to the extent of congressional pressure.

Q: Did you have any direction or pressure from the Department of State, the visa office, or from head of consular affairs? Or were you pretty well left alone?

DEVLIN: Pretty much left alone. One of the advantages of being that close on not just visas but on other matters, too, it was easy, convenient, and effective to just pick up the telephone and call the head of the visa office or whoever in whatever part of the SCA seemed to be appropriate to call. Also to do the same thing with interested parties in the United States, particularly, for example, in protection work.

Q: This would be like in Hong Kong, as I recall. When I served as consul general both in Seoul and in Saigon, I would be pulled out of bed at 3:00 o'clock in the morning and asked by someone about a visa case. I was not in a very good position to answer from my apartment. Did you have the same problem?

DEVLIN: No, because we were in the same time zone as the eastern United States.

Q: Would you in Hong Kong have that sort of a situation?

DEVLIN: In Hong Kong, no, I don't recall ever getting a call at night. We got a fair amount in the office.

Q: Who was the ambassador when you were in Santo Domingo?

DEVLIN: Good question. Ambassador Hurwitch.

Q: Was he a politically appointed ambassador?

DEVLIN: He's a career man.

Q: Did you find this was useful? Did he bother you with pressures, or did he leave you alone?

DEVLIN: Yes to both. There seemed to be almost a policy on the part of the Dominican Government to encourage emigration, and we would find that very high-ranking persons in the government would be applying whatever pressures they could on whatever person

in the embassy they could, me, the ambassador, the third secretary, anyone, in order to push visas for their friend. The ambassador, on more than one occasion, did seek to put in a good word for some applicant that would be sponsored by somebody in a position of influence, would always do it in such a way, though, that obviously one could refuse, and very often I did refuse.

Q: You were running what can only be described as a visa mill. How did the staff, both the Dominican staff working for you and the Americans working for you, hold up under the pressures there?

DEVLIN: Well, throughout the consulate general; first we had a rotation of junior officers, and we moved those throughout each section within the whole consular office. To the degree possible, we moved the regularly assigned officers from one particular function to another, so that other than the person in charge of non-immigrant visas, we would not have any other one person who would spend all of their time doing non-immigrant visas. So we made an attempt to share the load, because the non-immigrant visa side was the most difficult.

Q: Did you have problems with officers turning sour, who had prejudices against either Dominicans or had a great deal of difficulty living with the fact that almost everybody they would see on a working basis is lying to them?

DEVLIN: Some of that, but a problem with the first junior officers, particularly non-immigrant visa workers was not that they would turn sour, but that they thought that the people really did deserve to come into the United States, and that we should be as little hindrance as possible, and that what we were doing was really rather archaic. We also had a problem with the young officers, because this was their first time in which they had been the object of rather lavish flattery, had been treated very royally by quite wealthy people in the community, had been guests at some rather fine homes, and they had difficulty appreciating that these people had friends who had friends who had friends who

had friends, who wanted a visa, and that for these wealthy people, influential people, really, it was appropriate in their society for them to speak to a consular officer in behalf of somebody who was three or four or five stages away in terms of friendship, in order to facilitate a visa for them.The way the system worked was that, “I will do you a favor, you will do me a favor.” And each person does favors for those above him and those below him. In this way, the favor for Jose Mendez, who is a barber, goes from one of his clients to another one of his clients, each up at a higher level, until it reaches maybe a general, a colonel, an owner of a large establishment, a member of the Foreign Ministry, even a member of the Cabinet, even from the president's office, and in order for that person at the end of this to be able to show that he has authority, has power, and can, in fact, do things for his contacts below him, he will approach the embassy on a visa case.

We would receive pressures from all of these people. The junior officers had a great deal of trouble recognizing that their popularity—and they were popular—was not based entirely upon their handsomeness and their wit and their wisdom, but that there was, in fact, no such thing as a free lunch.

Q: Did any get over their head while you were there?

DEVLIN: No.

Q: No one was relieved of duty?

DEVLIN: No.

Q: How did you deal with this?

DEVLIN: In my weekly meetings, I raised it several times, and on an individual basis, and in talking to the heads of the immigrant visa and non-immigrant visa units, I kept emphasizing this.

Q: How was living as chief of the consular section, as consul general? How did you find living at Santo Domingo?

DEVLIN: The living was quite comfortable. Housing was very good. In that position, one was invited to virtually anything and everything, almost without end if one so chose, a very active social life. The Dominicans, as a people, are gracious and friendly. The problem which comes out into a social problem is that the Dominicans are gracious, they're friendly, intelligent, they like Americans, and they see nothing wrong with converting a purely social occasion into a time to press for visas for a friend.

Q: What about the fact that so many of the Dominicans were armed? You must have been refusing a great many visas. Would this cause any problems? You tell a person who's going to pick up a gun at the end of the day that, no, he can't have a visa.

DEVLIN: Well, the only problem that we had was for a while myself and the administrative officer received threats against our lives.

Q: Because of visas?

DEVLIN: Well, we didn't know. First, when I got there, there was always an armed policeman at my house, and then after we received these threats, then I had a bodyguard with me at all times. Then the admin section thinks that the threats were not really valid threats. They came to the conclusion that the threats were, in fact, sponsored from within the embassy for entirely internal purposes, in order to give somebody a promotion within the embassy, to do something or other. So with this conclusion, we were told that our lives were no longer in danger, so the bodyguards were removed. We still had the policeman at the house, as usual.

There was a constant awareness that a lot of people had guns, and it was very macho for people to have guns, to carry guns. In a volatile society like that, it was wise to be cautious. An American officer had been kidnaped several years before I was there. I

remember one time when walking back from lunch three or four blocks away from my office, a Dominican attorney whom I knew pulled over. He was driving by and saw me, pulled over and just about hustled me into his car. The walk that I was taking would bring me right by the same side of the street as the presidential palace, which is presumably an area which would be pretty much under guard, and there are lots of guards there, also lots of people. So the attorney said to me, “You should never, never go out on a walk alone. You are known. Too many people here know who you are, and you're just exposing yourself needlessly to danger.” Now, I think he was extremely overreactive, but nonetheless, I think there was probably something to it.

Q: Leaving that and coming back to the safe confines, such as they are, as Washington, DC, when you left Santo Domingo in 1978, you came back and were under different titles, number two person in the visa office.

DEVLIN: That's correct, and for several months I was in charge as Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary.

Q: Who was the head of consular affairs at the time?

DEVLIN: Barbara Watson.

Q: The whole time you were there?

DEVLIN: Right.

Q: You had two heads of the visa office while you were there, didn't you?

DEVLIN: Right.

Q: The title changed. What was the first title?

DEVLIN: It was just director.

Q: Director of the visa office, and you were deputy director. Then it became deputy assistant secretary for visas, and you were the associate director. This is the first time you were in Washington at the policy level, dealing with visas. I wonder if you could talk a little about how you found it, looking at the work from that perspective.

DEVLIN: Obviously, you found it on a day-to-day basis. You couldn't sort of sit up and look and sit back and make great plans on visa policy, because visa policy is really determined by Congress and the courts.

Two of the major things that we were involved in, first was the question of a major lawsuit by persons of Mexican birth who felt that in the process of converting from one law to another, that Mexicans had lost about 20,000 visa numbers, and this became an exceedingly complex law case.

Q: Did the law case have a name?

DEVLIN: We just referred to it as the Mexican number case. The means by which we could meet the court's rulings on this—the case was in the process and there were proposals and counter-proposals, and it became a very, very complicated problem to meet the demands from the court, to satisfy what the court thought was the solution to it. This went on and on and on. It would take a very long, very thick, and very detailed and dull book to describe exactly how it was done and so on. This was a continuing thread.

As part of the change in titles that you mentioned, that went along with a complete reorganization within each one of the elements of consular affairs.

Q: This is the Bureau of Consular Affairs.

DEVLIN: Yes. So that the visa office, the passport office, and the Office of Special Consular Services, each one was reorganized. This process of reorganization, which I must have spent 80% of my time on, was all in order to make an organizational justification

for the increase of titles, for deputy assistant secretary titles. The purpose of having the deputy assistant secretary titles, as opposed to office director titles, was so that the consular affairs bureau, with its echelon of four deputy assistant secretaries, would be equal to the various regional bureaus who had comparable setups. So we would, therefore, be able to speak with equal authority in our negotiations.

Q: So it was not just an ego problem, but it was really a matter of power.

DEVLIN: That's right. It may seem very crass or people may think it very childish to worry about things like that, but if you want to get something done in a bureaucracy, you have to start off from a position of strength. In a bureaucracy, a lot of this relates to title and organizational structure.

So we had session upon session upon session for this in Barbara's office. I represented the visa office, as Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary. Lorrie Lawrence represented the passport office as DAS, and—I've forgotten his name. He went off to London where he was consul general.

Q: Alan Giese?

DEVLIN: Alan Giese represented Special Consular Services as DAS, then Ron Somerville on the administrative side, and Barbara. We had sessions that lasted up to 10:00 o'clock at night, trying to get all of this done and by various means. So this was a major element of “policy” direction that one got from Washington.

Other than that, at the end of the Congress, the final days of the session ending in either 1978 or '79, at the final session, almost unbeknownst to anybody, there were passed literally half a dozen different laws or provisos, agenda, to other laws related to visa and consular functions. We didn't know about these until we started going through the laws. They weren't big ones, but there were little bits and pieces here and there amending this provision, amending that, and so on.

Q: These were done at the instigation of a particular congressman without any central direction from anybody.

DEVLIN: Yes. So we spent a lot of time sorting those things out, getting the regulations set up for them, because in most of these instances, there was no forewarning that they were coming, and therefore there was no opportunity to sit down with the congressional committee ahead of time and say, “Well, this is the direction you're going. These are the type of problems that we have run into on creating the regulations to implement this. It would be helpful if you would take this into consideration, because on a practical level for the consular officer in the field, this becomes very important,” which is the way we would do it routinely in dealing with the Subcommittee on Immigration in the House. That's the committee we dealt with. So there was a lot of running around to catch up with these laws.Then it was a matter of explaining them to the immigration attorneys and some of the ramifications of them.

Q: Did your opinion of immigrant attorneys change much?

DEVLIN: Not, not really. There had been set up, and I continued—I think it was quarterly meetings with immigrant attorneys. They would come in with their usual gripes, because a consular officer here or there hadn't given the attorney 25 hours of his day and so on.

It's a good part of our system that attorneys are kept honest by consular officers, and the consular officers are kept honest by attorneys. I don't mean “honest” in the sense of stealing or anything like that, but each one counterbalances the other. Each one looks at the same situation from a completely different perspective, and if they can work out a common ground of discussion, then there is a good possibility that you can end up with good respect for the attorney and for the consular officer, but in most cases, unfortunately, it's a matter of head bashing.

One of the objects of having these quarterly meetings with attorneys was to try to get some of this sort of thing, because we did not center these meetings on particular cases. Obviously some particular cases came up, but for the most part, we tried to do it in terms of, “This is how a consular officer views this,” and then try to elicit from them how the attorneys view these things, and try to reach some sort of compromise that, “You're not all right, and we may not always be right, but let's just see what we can do. You look at things and know things that we don't, and we know things that you don't.” So that was the objective that we had with the attorneys. I think to a degree it was helpful, to what degree we don't know, because we don't know, obviously, when the attorneys left these meetings and had their next contact with a consular officer, whether they were looking at it in the perspective and framework that we were trying to establish, or just, “That bastard, he kept me waiting outside his office for an hour.”

Q: What about your relations with Congress, both congressmen and the congressional staff dealing with visa matters? Was it a problem?

DEVLIN: It was a problem. It was an element of the job one had to deal with. In terms of dealing with the staff, of course, much of the congressional staff were the ones who really did the letters and who really pushed the cases and so on, and in the visa office, they would deal primarily with the public affairs section of the office and they would come up to me if there was a real problem. But Barbara Watson arranged for us to have a session in —I think it was in the Rayburn Building, in which we assembled. There must have been at least 100 congressional staffers concerned with visa matters and consular matters all told. We made our presentations to them, and we took their questions. I think to a very large degree we were able to, again, establish more of a common ground than we had before, getting something off a purely adversarial relationship onto a more cooperative relationship, or at least establishing some sort of a basis for mutual understanding.

Q: Sometimes as a consular officer in the field, one had the impression that the visa office really didn't care what you did, as long as you issued visas to people from whom there was congressional pressure. How did it look to you when you were in the visa office?

DEVLIN: That, of course, is the impression one can get in the field. On the other hand, if one could see how many times congressional pressure was directed against the visa office and ultimately against the consular officer in the field, but it never got to the field, because we were able to explain and to justify and get the congressional pressure off without having to involve the field. We did this a lot of times.

The only time I can think of that we really applied what I think, in retrospect, and thought at the time, too, from a legal point of view was a very bad policy, and that was the policy in regard to Iranian Jews. We caved to congressional pressures and allowed those admissions, and directed that the consular officers should consider that these people were going to return to Iran as soon as things straightened out in Iran. This made everybody swallow hard. We are talking primarily about the Jews in Iran, who were escaping. The congressional problem and the problem in Washington on this was the strength of the Jewish lobbies, and the rather justifiable fear on the part of the Jewish lobbies and many others that if Congress passed a special resolution which in any way would designate the Jews in Iran as refugees, that there was a very real possibility fear that this would turn the already violent Khomeini movement physically and violently against the Jewish community in Iran.

Q: I can understand where there was the feeling we were not going to let what happened in the 1930s, when Hitler came to power, happen again by turning refugees loose. But of course, there was a major difference, and that was the state of Israel exists, in which every Iranian Jew had the right to Israeli citizenship. Did that play a factor? Why was the United States a refuge spot, when there was a Jewish state in existence?

DEVLIN: The same thing applies to all of Jewish emigration, Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union, Jewish emigration from Iran, Jewish emigration from any of the Bloc countries. The ostensible purpose of the emigration, in most cases, is for the Jewish person to show evidence that he would be acceptable in entering another country, and in most cases, this meant an issuance of appropriate documentation for exit. As we know, the facts of life are that of the Jewish #migr#s from the Soviet Union or from Iran, Romania, other areas, a very, very large percentage of them truly want to come to the United States, and Israel is a second choice. For the American Jewish community, for the Jewish lobby here in the United States and therefore, to a large degree, the easy verdict for a member of Congress is to say, yes, they can come to the United States. We, of course, always had traditionally open doors to refugees, and that it would be against our traditions to say that you can't come to us; you'll have to go to some other country, whether it be Israel or not.

Q: As I recall it, weren't instructions not limited to Iranian Jews, but also to other Iranians?

DEVLIN: Yes.

Q: I'm speaking now as consul general of Naples at the time, and I remember you calling me from Washington. There was what amounted to, really, a consular revolt overseas, particularly in Europe, of the Department issuing blank but rather pointed instructions to treat Iranians applying for non-immigrant visas as non-immigrants, and we all knew that they were coming to the United States to settle. And the visa officers, in effect, refusing to issue the visas. Is that how you saw it from Washington?

DEVLIN: One more consideration that was going on at the same time: the people who were holding our embassy personnel and our embassy as prisoners.

Q: You're talking about the hostages in Tehran.

DEVLIN: Yes. The people who were holding the hostages, the Khomeini mobs, these people had as one demand that we issue visas to them, which we didn't, and to any other Iranians that we could under direct threat that if not, something violent would happen to these hostages that they held.

Q: This was not very clear, as I recall the news accounts and instructions we were getting.

DEVLIN: No, it wasn't in those accounts at all.

Q: What was the purpose? The idea of the revolution was that the United States was a contaminating force. Why would anybody want to go to such a contaminated power as the United States?

DEVLIN: Well, the whys and wherefores I don't know, because it's obviously contradictory. But life is contradictory, and that is one of the very strong things that came out.

Q: It's very interesting. Do you think it's because the group that took over were basically students, and Iranian students and students have always been sort of the problem child of American consular officers in Europe for the last 20 years? Iranian students have been shopping for non-immigrant visas around Europe and refused periodically. Do you think this may have been behind the thinking?

DEVLIN: It may have, but I don't know. I'm not in a position to speculate. I don't know well enough the Iranian situation. I never worked in Iran, and I certainly wasn't there in Iran at the time. We do know from reports that we were getting that that was a definite pressure that was being caused.

We knew, all of us who had any role whatsoever in this, we knew that it was not a popular decision. We knew it was certainly not consistent with the law. But it was done as a humanitarian matter, and it was done as a matter of essentially political convenience.

Q: Were you there when it resolved itself, or did it resolve itself, the problem of consuls, in a way, defying the instructions of the visa officer?

DEVLIN: Eventually, the pressures for issuance of visas abated.

Q: You retired in 1980?

DEVLIN: January of '80.

Q: Is there anything else governing the subject we've been talking about that you would like to comment on?

DEVLIN: No, I think that probably pretty much covers about everything. I can't think of any other thing that we really got involved in in Washington. We got involved with refugees at different consular conferences—the Vietnamese, South Asian refugees.

I went to Havana to talk about getting the Cuban prisoners out to the United States.

Q: Would you tell me something about your experience in Havana?

DEVLIN: Three of us went. I was State Department, a man from the Immigration Service, and a woman from the visa office. It was a program, in place for the issuance of refugee visas to certain categories of Cuban prisoners. The process was being bogged down for various reasons.

Q: These are prisoners in Cuban jails.

DEVLIN: In Cuban jails. Our object in going was to find out what the problems were, why it was being slowed, and to see whether or not it was possible to speed this up. We talked with our embassy office there and with Cuban officials. While in mutual agreement, we got the arrangement working a bit more well. It was essentially a matter of patrolling paper and of the Cuban Government releasing on an orderly basis the prisoners.

Q: You mentioned Vietnamese refugees. What role did the visa office play in the refugee process?

DEVLIN: The visa office itself played not very much of a role, because in Washington that was done by the refugee affairs people. But since lots of consular officers were involved in it, particularly in Bangkok, but also in Hong Kong and other places, it was a matter of interest to Barbara Watson. So when we had a consul conference in Singapore, we made a point of visiting refugee camps there and getting a look at the situation.

Q: Bill, thank you very much. I appreciate you taking the time.

DEVLIN: You're welcome, Stu.

End of interview